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ABSTRACT

This study investigated the process of negotiation involved in identity construction among Latina college students in a Latina sorority, noting reasons for choosing to form or join the sorority. The sorority was in a predominantly white Eastern public university. Researchers conducted observations, interviews with four focal students, and informal interviews with other members. Group membership fluctuated between 5 and 20 members. Strategic sisterhood emerged as a dominant theme, with four symbolic categories within the domain denoted by the term sisterhood (affiliation, recognition, solidarity, and selection). In seeking to become more visible, sorority members were pushing for recognition under the auspices of a Latina cultural organization. By accommodating the dominant cultural structure of the Greek-letter organization, they gave up some autonomy and self-determination in order to gain some kind of recognition. Reasons for being in the sorority included power through sisterhood and power through community. Participants were engaged in ongoing negotiation of the meaning and goals of their participation in the group. Construction of a group cultural identity occurred as a result of push and pull in a centripetal fashion. The end result was not an end; as a community it is constantly evolving. (Contains 26 references.) (SM)

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ED 441 887

Strategic Sisterhood in a Latina Sorority: Affiliation, Recognition, and Solidarity

by

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"Well, I had a bad impression about sororities, but being a Latina sorority--it makes me stronger, being with girls from the Latino community."

--prospective member, informational meeting 9/23/98

During the last two decades, feminists and sociologists have noted the signs of resistance, of strategic action, and of cultural production in groups previously viewed (or ignored) simply as marginalized, reactive, and subordinated. While the marginalization and subordination of individuals and classes of individuals are an undeniable reality, the complexity of power asymmetry as experienced by individuals requires a more nuanced analytic approach. Researchers seem inevitably to face the conflict of exploring identity at the cost of de-emphasizing structural factors (or vice-versa). My interest lies in the cultural construction of women who occupy positions of subordination in their respective contexts. As a feminist researcher interested in the intersection of language, gender, and culture in college women's social behavior, I seek to investigate sites of interaction and the construction of group and individual identities.

In order to gain insight into the complex process of negotiation involved in the identity construction of Latina college students, I conducted a critical ethnographic case study of a Latina sorority (referred to throughout this paper by the pseudonym Mu Lambda Rho) during the first three semesters of its existence on the campus at which I conducted my study (which I will refer to by the pseudonym Gateway University). Through this study I attempted to understand a) how individual conceptions of ethnic identity contributed to the group's culture, and b) how objective forces (i.e., external forces as well as forces within the group, such as interpersonal relations) contributed to the construction of the group's culture. This paper focuses on one aspect of that study, attempting to answer the question: What can we understand about this group of Latina college students' experience by examining their reasons for choosing to form or join a Latina sorority?

A brief history of Greek-letter organizations

Historically White Greek-letter organizations (GLOs) began over 200 years ago as academic societies with the founding of the first fraternity (Phi Beta Kappa, 1776) soon followed by secret social orders (Kappa Alpha, 1825, was the first). Similarly, the first such secret social order for women developed from the Adelphean Society (founded in 1851) which later became a sorority (Alpha Delta Phi, 1904, currently known as Alpha Delta Pi). These organizations by and for conservative elite students (Horowitz, 1987), arose seemingly for the purpose of establishing elite status within an increasingly liberal college environment. In contrast, historically Black Greek-letter groups (the first of which was the Alpha Phi Alpha fraternity, 1906, followed soon after by the sorority Alpha Kappa Alpha, 1908) were founded to foster scholarship and achievement among African Americans, in addition to fostering social bonds with like-minded students as in the White fraternities and sororities. Later, under the influence of the Black women's club movement and with the proliferation of stunningly powerful and courageous African American women who became public figures and leaders in their field but also happened to have been members of historically Black sororities (for example Mary Church Terrell, Barbara Jordan, Lena Horne, and Nikki Giovanni are all alumnae members of Delta Sigma Theta), the role of the Black sororities was transformed to one with a more public commitment, particularly on the part of alumnae (Giddings, 1988).

Perhaps following this model, later beneficiaries of the civil rights movement have formed ethnically- or culturally-based GLOs such as the Asian sorority Alpha Kappa Delta Phi; or the Latino fraternity Sigma Lambda Beta, Latina sorority Sigma Lambda Upsilon; or the various fraternal organizations (many co-ed) based on shared interest such as gay/lesbian /transgender identity (Lambda Delta Lambda, Delta Lambda Pi), community service (Acacia), and so on. The first Latino fraternity, Sigma Iota, was founded in 1912 and later merged with another, Fi Lambda Alpha, to form Phi Iota Alpha in 1932 (see www.fiota.com). The first Latina sorority, Lambda Theta Alpha, was founded in 1975 at Kean University (Union, New Jersey; see www.lambdalady.org). Both are still going strong today and have been joined by many more:

nationwide there are 16 Latino fraternities and 25 Latina sororities (listed on LatinoGreek homepage, www.latinogreeks.com). Perhaps because of the longer history or because of the greater amount of information on White and Black students in general, there is much less published research on Latino/a GLOs than on White and Black GLOs. For this reason, the literature reviewed focuses on White and Black GLOs with the hope that this paper will stimulate further research on Latino/a GLOs (and Latinos/as in Higher Education in general).

Negative aspects of the Greek system are those usually presented in mass media representations possibly because hazing, stunts, and bizarre rituals make for sensational stories. Secrecy--surrounding rituals, oaths, and symbols--and exclusivity--achieved through a membership selection process--add to the allure of these organizations for students, but there is also the very real benefit of connections (social and career-oriented) through the extensive alumni networks of the various groups; many of these alumni attribute their success (in life, careers) to membership in the sorority or fraternity. Aside from all of this, if you ask current members what is important to them, it is very likely that they will talk about something to do with friendships, the close bonds they form with their fraternity brothers or sorority sisters (Jara, n.d.).

Researchers have looked at women's friendships in general and relationships of women in sororities in a variety of ways. Drawing on Ann Swidler's (1986) notion of "strategies of action," Lisa Handler (1995) explains Hochschild's (1989) adaptation of that notion to refer to "gender strategy" whereby cultural notions of gender give rise to strategies for solving problems. Handler uses this concept to portray sororities as a kind of gender strategy employed by women for particular ends. She finds that women in the nationally affiliated White sorority that she studied used the sorority to help them "navigate...the male-dominated culture of romance" (p. 236) prevalent in campus life. She also points out, however, that rather than challenging the system of gender relations, sororities serve to reinforce the existing order. For White women in this and other studies, the sorority serves primarily as a way to meet men, or at least to secure a social position based on popularity with men (Handler; Berkowitz & Padavic, 1999; Horowitz, 1987).

Sisterhood and sororities

Not surprisingly, the women interviewed in studies of sororities consistently report "sisterhood" (the literal meaning of the word "sorority") as the main reason for joining a sorority (Handler, 1995; Berkowitz & Padavic, 1999; Olivas, 1996). However, the meanings and functions attached to "sisterhood" vary, depending significantly on the cultural group to which the sorority belongs. In the White sororities, for example, relationships between women seemed to function primarily in aid of securing male partners--"finding men" or "getting a man" (Berkowitz & Padavic, 1999, p. 532), "expanding the dating pool" (Handler); although White sorority women talked about friendships in these studies, it was clear that the priority was not on the relationship with sisters.

Dorothy Holland and Margaret Eisenhart, in their (1990) ethnographic study of college women at two campuses in the southern US, refer to the "sexual auction block" as a central concept in the prestige economy of the college women's peer group. In their study, Holland and Eisenhart found a cultural model of romance that operated across peer groups on both of the campuses (one campus was predominantly White, the other predominantly Black). In this model, a woman's prestige depended on her attractiveness rating as determined through her ability to attract a man and maintain a relationship; the model takes into account subjective qualities of the man, rating his prestige as a factor in the potential prestige that may be conferred upon his partner. The researchers had intended to discover why more women were not choosing to pursue academic majors and careers in science, but in the process, they discovered a much more insidious pattern of socialization into a peer culture in which women systematically lowered their expectations, tempered their ambitions, and in most cases, tied their hopes for the future to success in finding a suitable male partner. This phenomenon might be exaggerated rather than created in sororities.

In contrast, the Black sorority women in Alexandra Berkowitz and Irene Padavic's (1999) case study of White and black sororities at two state universities in the southern US, tended not to emphasize heterosexual unions, but rather focused on individual growth and community service, i.e., "to facilitate economic self-sufficiency ('getting ahead,' in the words of these women)" (p. 532; see also Giddings, 1988). This makes sense in light of the history of Black Greek-letter

organizations, whose development "was more than an imitation of the White Greek-letter groups that excluded them...[they] were also calculated to strike a blow against proponents of industrial, nonacademic education for Afro-Americans" (Giddings, p.19). Paula Giddings also points out the forces that helped to shape Black Greek-letter organizations included racism, sexism, and a sense of racial obligation. She notes that "...the early growth of the fraternal organizations, in most instances, was on predominantly White campuses--where there was a greater need for a haven against discrimination" (p. 18). The Latino Greek-letter groups seem to have come about by a similar process (although with different historical antecedents).

In addition, like the Black Greek-letter organizations, Latino/a Greek-letter organizations tend to emphasize non-date functions, non-alcoholic gatherings, and gatherings organized around activities such as games (e.g., dominoes), fundraising, or community service. Another similar feature is an orientation towards career enhancement, including members' active involvement in alumni chapters after graduation. Cultural awareness, academics, and community service are typical core elements in these groups (see Greek-letter organization homepages on the internet, www.latinogreeks.com).

Sisterhood as a concept in sororities, then, is more of a means to an end than the sisterhood discussed by feminist theorists, but the comparison demands elaboration. In feminist theorists' discussions of sisterhood, the point tends to be to establish the existence or validity of claims to universal gendered characteristics (e.g., the work of liberal feminists such as Nancy Chodorow, Carol Gilligan), or to question the utility of claiming gender solidarity (e.g., the work of critical feminists such as bell hooks, Patricia Hill Collins). The collection of papers presented at the Desperately Seeking Sisterhood Conference (Eighth Annual Women's Studies Network (UK) Association Conference, Stirling, June 1995) address various aspects of sisterhood as a concept--basically opposing political sisterhood to personal friendship, and examining fractures, bonds, and ideologies associated with and underlying the construct of sisterhood. In one of the papers in this collection, Annette Kilcooley uses a series of short vignettes to problematize the strategy of using sisterhood as a construct to foster recognition and build political collectivity. Reiterating bell

hooks' enquiry "Must I call every woman sister?", she concludes that often, such a stance amounts to collusion--in racism, sexism, violence, for example. She writes, "In questions of feminist solidarity, it is thus a mistake to presume that sexism is always bound by a gender opposition tying sexist stereotyping to men, without considering racism and signifiers of 'race', as complicating variables between *white* women" (1997, p. 39). The point is that, gender *alone* is not a valid basis for claiming solidarity; context (social, historical, political, economic, geographic) must also be an important consideration. Furthermore, as Kathy Davis and Sue Fisher (1993) point out, "Like all other categories, woman is a fictive device--a device that is socially, historically, and discursively constructed in relationship to other categories (i.e., women/men, white women/black women)" (p. 7). They urge feminist scholars to direct our attention to "the ways femininity is negotiated in the various contexts of everyday life" (p. 7). Thus, theorists focus on identifying the forms of sisterhood and seeking justification for (or questioning) the ends to which it is used.

In contrast, in sororities the focus of sisterhood is narrower—on unifying a group of individuals to improve their chances at social advancement according to the culturally appropriate strategies of the respective community. For example, whereas the focus of attention in the White sororities is on individual social development during the college years, effectively achieved through enhancing the dating pool, Black sororities look at the college membership as just an initial phase, placing greater emphasis on service after graduation (Berkowitz & Padavic, 1999; Handler, 1995; Giddings, 1988). Similarly, Latina sororities tend to seek to enhance the careers and social commitment of their members (Olivas, 1996; and see internet pages for Latina Greek organizations via links from www.latinogreeks.com). In addition, where Black women can unite around shared historical oppression, Latina women can unite around the ethnic label "Latina" and its implications of shared historical oppression. Of course this is not to say that individuals will necessarily have personally experienced discrimination based on language, class, or race, but rather that the history of the larger imagined community encompasses (among other things) widespread oppression of members of Latino communities, that within the imagined community there are overlaps of experience.

Imagined communities

In order to understand how participants view their position as members of a larger "Latino community," I draw on Benedict Anderson's (1991) definition of the nation as an "imagined community." He writes that the nation is *imagined* in the sense that "the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion" (p. 6), and it is imagined as a *community* because "regardless of the actual inequality and exploitation that may prevail in each, the nation is always conceived as a deep, horizontal comradeship" (p. 7). I use Anderson's (1991) notion of imagined communities to understand how the women at Gateway University viewed the national sorority organization of Mu Lambda Rho as the imagined community in which they sought membership. This notion may also be applied to membership in a Greek-letter community, thus members of this sorority may imagine themselves to be members of at least three, perhaps overlapping, imagined communities: the Greek-letter community, the Latino community and the national Mu Lambda Rho community (not to mention the Panhellenic Council--a sub-community of the campus Greek-letter community, the campus Latino community, and so on). Ethnic label appropriation is one possible strategy for achieving alignment with the imagined community. Suzanne Oboler (1995, chap. 3) discusses how during various historical periods, Latinos have also emphasized membership in nations outside the national boundaries of the United States, identifying themselves as, for example Mexican (as in the Chicano Movement), rather than as Mexican American.

In this paper, I will share findings that indicate that women in this group strategically use sisterhood and ethnic label appropriation in pursuit of recognition--in order to make themselves "visible", i.e., as a strategy for appropriating dominant cultural capital.

Struggle for recognition

In Justice Interruptus, Nancy Fraser (1997/1995, chap. 1) poses the dilemma faced by groups seeking equity and social justice between gaining recognition and effecting redistribution of resources. Groups' struggles to gain redistribution of material resources based on recognition of

their unique group identities run the risk of generating misrecognition (as in the deficit paradigm which currently holds sway in thinking about educational policy for non-native speakers of English and/or speakers of non-dominant varieties of English) or of a surface reallocation of respect that does nothing to address broader structural inequalities (as in the liberal pluralist ideology-driven policies widely labeled "multiculturalism" or "tolerance").

On the other hand, groups seeking redistribution of material resources must make the argument that they are no different from everybody else in order to convincingly argue for more far-reaching changes in the relations of production (as in socialist systems). Alternatively, one could argue for completely changing the way groups are defined and undermining the premises of distribution in the first place (for example, arguing that privileged White women should not be eligible for affirmative action positions; or arguing that poor White men should be included in such redistributive mechanisms). Using this framework, where did the women of Mu Lambda Rho fall? I return to this question in the discussion.

Oboler (1995) points out that Latino civil rights movements--from the Chicano movement to the actions of Puerto Rican groups such as the Young Lords--recovery of ethnic identity has played an important role. Beginning with appropriation of the label "Latina", it seemed likely that recovery/reinforcement of ethnic identity was at least part of the project of this group of women. How they chose to do it is also interesting: by founding/joining an organization clearly dedicated to the cause of individual transformation through collective work for the greater good of an imagined community. Giddings' (1988) discussion of the emphasis of Black sororities on individual transformation also sheds light on what is happening in this Latina sorority:

> Black sororities have also had to grapple with how the concept of service is translated into political activism. The sorority may be unique among Black purposive organizations as it was not conceived to transform society but to transform the individual. The sorority is a sisterhood, and an enabler that helps individuals to grow through cooperation, leadership development, 'culture' and exposure to the leading figures and issues of the times...On the other hand, the

> sorority's emphasis on being an individual rather than societal transformer insulates its members from the kind of polarization, dependence on outside resources and disruption that other organizations have faced (p. 21).

Appropriating this enabling structure could facilitate the participation of this group of Latina college students in a previously inaccessible stratum of college life. Even if they were never to participate in any activities with the White Greek-letter organizations, they would have access to a particular kind of experience that includes leadership, cooperation, and culture learning.

Political scientist Carol Hardy-Fanta studied Latina political organization in Boston and found that the structures and meanings that Boston Latinas (women) developed around political participation differed significantly from those of Boston Latinos (men). She posits "the '4 C's' of [Latina] political participation":

> For Latina women, politics is an interactive process, built on making *connections*. Politics for Latina women is *interpersonal* politics. The gender differences in how politics is defined by Latina men and Latina women in Boston cluster around four key elements of participatory theory--***connectedness*** versus positions and status, ***collectivity*** versus hierarchy, ***community*** versus formal structures, and ***consciousness*** of the link between personal self-development and political activism versus a limited image of political action (1993, p. 36).

In part, I hoped this study could reveal to what extent this group's endeavor was a political one, and if so, to what extent the participation structure resembled Hardy-Fanta's model. I also sought to understand what the members of the sorority in this study had in mind when they decided to form/join a Latina sorority. This is the focus of the remainder of this paper.

Method of Study

The following discussion is based on an ethnographic study of a Latina sorority, Mu Lambda Rho, in an Eastern public university (Gateway University) during the academic year 1998-1999. None of the sororities on this campus had a house at the time of the study, but the

Panhellenic Council (a nationally affiliated organization, the local branch of which serves as the University's recognizing body for historically White sororities with more than ten members) had an arrangement with the University whereby those sororities it recognized could have suites in the residence halls. In addition, the National Pan-Hellenic Council (NPHC, the organization for recognizing African American Greek-letter organizations) sororities also had suites, but none of the Latina sororities on this campus was residential. The discussion here relies on extensive participant observation spanning one academic year, a series of semi-structured and in-depth interviews with four focal participants (three founding members--Adriana, Guadalupe, and Marta--and the alumna advisor, Constancia), and informal interviews with other members (all participants are referred to by pseudonyms). During the period of the study, the group membership fluctuated between five and 20 members.

I selected this group because of the unique opportunity to be present from the founding of the interest group. I had been seeking out Latina college students at this large, predominantly White institution in order to better understand how non-majority students negotiate academic contexts and to what extent heritage language served as an asset in their college life. When I met Constancia, she told me about the Latina sorority chapter she was helping to found. The idea of a group that hoped to bring together Latinas–an undefined term used to refer to an inherently diverse group–interested me as I hoped to examine the role of language in construction of the group's culture, following Weedon's (1987/1997) poststructuralist feminist theory of the role of language in constituting subjectivity. As the sorority's alumna advisor, Constancia facilitated my access to the group, introducing me as someone interested in learning about their sorority. Constancia emphasized to the members the paucity of research on Latina college students, encouraging them to help me in order to contribute to the fund of knowledge. In addition, she made sure that I was invited to all non-secret functions (Greek-letter organizations typically have some secret rituals and discussions which members take an oath not to reveal to anyone outside of the organization) during the period of study. Partly through my own ability to communicate in English and Spanish and a familiarity with Latino culture gained through having lived and worked in several Latin American

countries, I was able to become integrated into the group and participate fairly comfortably in activities with them.

The beginning of the period of study coincided with the first "interest" meeting of the group; at this meeting, general information was given about the sorority's tenets and general aims. The four focal participants led this and subsequent meetings during the first semester of the study. At the beginning of the second semester, the group petitioned the national board (of the sorority) for "colony" status (official recognition of a group of at least ten members, in good standing; an intermediate step leading to "chapter" status, which requires twenty members), and twelve founding members were inducted. During the following weeks, the group attempted to recruit new members as they underwent "pledging" activities and rituals; that is, trial members engage in certain activities (specific to each chapter, with guidelines that are specific to each organization but which tend to be similar across organizations), working towards becoming "active" (fully initiated) members.

The group was quite diverse in terms of ethnic and racial backgrounds. Most members tended to self-identify according to national origin (Ecuadorian, Dominican, Mexican; or Puerto Rican, in which case members treat Puerto Rican origin/heritage as on par with nationality), but those born in the US tended to say where in the US they were from (for example "I'm Puerto Rican, but I'm from New York."). One member was Jamaican American ("Jamerican"), not of Latino ancestry at all, but interested in learning about Latino culture because of Latino/a friends. I was present at nearly all of the activities in which the group participated, including fund-raisers (such as ethnic food festivals, candy sales, a computer repair workshop), community service (such as helping out at the St. Vincent de Paul thrift shop, throwing a fiesta at a local nursing home), academic activities (such as a study skills seminar, weekly group study hours), "sisterhood" activities (such as handmade book-making, vase decoration, henna body art), "socials" (informal, non-date get-togethers).

My role became more complex as the study progressed. I faced an inherent dilemma in being a White researcher studying a group of women who were different from me in many ways,

and I am still anxious about representing them. At the same time, I am aware that their cooperation may have been based in part in a desire to appropriate my research: it is, after all, in part about them, and their presentations of self are, to a great extent, "the data." Ethnography is a dialogic process, too; my questions and my perspective influenced what I saw, how participants perceived me, and how they responded to my continued presence. I was always present as a *potential* mirror or witness, ally or opponent. In this way, although it is as complete as I can make it, it is nevertheless a partial representation. The reader can get a glimpse of this in the scene below.

Mu Lambda Rho--a beginning

It's late September by the time Constancia and the would-be founders finally arrange an initial informational meeting. Because groups must be recognized by the University in order to reserve rooms, Guadalupe has reserved a room at the Cultural Center under the name of another organization (of which she happens to be Vice President). Hanging on the walls of the room are portraits of African American men and women—former directors of the Cultural Center. Below the portraits Constancia has taped white paper with the names of the 34 chapters and pink paper with the names of the 11 colonies at various colleges nationwide. She has also set out a display of items with the sorority insignia: a paddle, a mug, a license plate cover, a bright pink T-shirt.

The room, however, is too small for the number of women who ultimately show up--a table and ten chairs around it squeezed into a room that measures barely 8X15 feet, quickly swamped by the ten additional chairs squeezed in to accommodate the young women eagerly pushing in. Constancia seems pleasantly surprised, and anyway, there's a feeling of warmth in the room--more than just the warm bodies.

One by one, the women introduce themselves. As they do, I notice the similarities--complexions more varied in hue than is usual at a gathering on this campus, voices slightly Spanish-accented in many cases, expressions showing

tentativeness tempered with a kind of determination and alternating with certainty. Some of the women are tentative in asking whether it's OK to speak in Spanish, or Spanglish. A few of the women confess that although they are Latinas, they can't speak Spanish. The group responds each time by indicating acceptance--¡Si! ¿Cómo no? ¡Pue', no importa! [Sure! Why not? It doesn't matter!]. The women proudly announce their countries of origin; I get the feeling that more is going on than meets the ear*.

Constancia has asked the women to say what they think a sorority is, and to tell some of their concerns, fears, and expectations about sororities. As I look around and listen to the very different stories of the women present, I realize the complexity of defining what a Latina is, and I get an inkling of why these women would seek other women "like them" (that is, like in their differences) to spend time with, to forge bonds with, to be sisters with. [fieldnotes, 9/23/98]

*[Note: It will be months before I learn that a woman who calls herself Mexican, for example, may have lived in the US. since she was nine years old. One of the women won't claim US nationality because of her document status; others follow the example of those who have spoken before them, proclaiming their birthrights.]

In this study, strategic sisterhood emerged as a dominant theme. Using Spradley's (1979) approach to identifying cultural meanings encoded in symbolic categories, I identified four principal symbolic categories within the domain denoted by the cover term "sisterhood":

1. affiliation
2. recognition
3. solidarity, and
4. selection.

The reader may think of these categories as: *Sisterhood as a way to attain/achieve...X category.* For example, under the first category below, affiliation, I show how participants indicated through utterances and behaviors that they were using sisterhood as a means of effecting affiliation. Sub-categories within each category show the form or function of the category in particular circumstances or to fulfill particular needs.

1. Affiliation

At the initial informational meeting in September described above, each woman seated around the table stated her reasons for wanting to join the sorority. Common responses dealt with wanting to form close bonds in the absence of family, wanting to be in "a group that I can relate to," "*confiar*"/"someone I can trust," "someone I can rely on," "*convivir*", and so on. The term "sisterhood" was used repeatedly, mantra-like, as if the meaning was assumed to be understood by all. Through subsequent observations and interviews, however, it became clear that there were differences--some subtle, and some not so subtle--in the meanings that participants attributed to this term.

• Support

Perhaps due to the traditional importance attributed to family in Latino culture (Marin, 1993; Moore, 1970) or perhaps in response to feelings of cultural isolation due to the remote location of the campus (distant from urban centers which might be more ethnically diverse, less European-White dominated than this campus whose undergraduate minority student population comprises only 13.5% of the total, with Hispanic/Latino students making up only 3% of the total), many of the women made reference to sisterhood relationships that could fill the gap left vacant when they came to Gateway.

Some emphasized the support through linguistic affiliation with sorors (sorority sisters), as Lucia said:

> "I want to be with people who speak the same language, have the same roots as I do, especially here because it's such a big campus" [application interview 1/25/99].

Sylvia Hurtado's (1994) article on the hostile institutional climate for Latino students on college campuses reveals that the majority (68%) of Latino students in her study felt that students at their institution knew very little about Hispanic culture (p. 35). According to Hurtado, racial/ethnic tension and discrimination on campus produce a hostile climate for Latino students, so it is not surprising that students would seek support in affiliation with students who are more familiar with their culture(s)--or at least willing to learn (as discussed below).

For others, simply feeling less anonymous was comforting. As Marta told me:

> "[It's] a benefit--having somebody to talk to you, to just care about you--that's a big benefit. Because we're like numbers in the school. We don't really stand for anything, it's just 'Oh, he's another number.'"[interview, 1/6/99].

When I spent a day with her going to her classes, she didn't speak at all during most of her classes. As I observed her sitting silently while the lecturer spoke, moving from one building to the next, it was easy to see how she might feel like a number. In one of the classes, she was involved in group project work, and she spoke. To her group members (and to the professor), she was not just a number, but this was in only one of her six classes.

Many of the participants wanted a basic kind of support through affiliation: true, lasting friendships. As Michele said:

> "I want to have true friendships...to be able to leave [Gateway U] with a quality love for others, true friends beyond college." [application interview 1/25/99]

And Guadalupe, who belongs to several other campus organizations, made the point even more strongly:

> "It's about togetherness--being together, helping each other. And if you don't have that, I don't see the point in a sorority."[interview, 1/10/99]

Beyond that, Guadalupe also emphasized an important distinction between the kind of support and friendship sisterhood promised and that promised by ordinary relationships with others in college:

> "Sisterhood [means] having someone that...you can count on...And, it's not gonna be for one semester or the amount of time that you're in college, 'cause it will basically be

forever. Like, wherever you go, if you find a sister, you know, they're--if you ask for help, they will." [interview 1/10/99]

Thus, affiliation for support both during and after college was one aim of sisterhood.

• **Learning about Latino culture**

Constancia, the alumna advisor, articulated the "cultural awareness" aim of the sorority:

"The cultural awareness component has three parts to it: One is to continue working towards making others aware of our culture. ...The other part is for us to actually know about each other. ...And the third part is for the sorority to be a learning experience for those women who are Latina but do not know a lot about their culture. ...I mean, we always tend to think about--as minority groups--what we have to teach them, and they are the ones who are racist, so they are the ones that don't understand enough. And we sometimes forget that we need to first work inside and know what we're talking about and know about each other before we go outside." [interview, 1/16/99].

Having founded a chapter at her own undergraduate institution, Constancia had strong opinions about what this chapter could be. She also realized, however, that she had to give the "founders" (the women who were the first group, who were establishing the colony at Gateway University) leeway, to let them define the colony, within general guidelines (see Appendix A, an extract from a Mu Lambda Rho informational brochure). As Constancia indicates, however, there is no consensus on what Latino culture is, and one aim of the sorority is to help members learn about their own and each others' cultural backgrounds to help form a common understanding which they could then also share with the larger college campus community.

Prospective members indicated that this was one of the things that attracted them to this sorority, that this was one of the aims of sisterhood. As Isabel told us:

"I want to know more about different kinds of women--mixed Latina and other races...I want to work with and develop empathy for different people, to understand--take into consideration everybody's experience as being Latina in order to understand my own." [application interview, 2/22/99]

Isabel clearly has an idea that people have different experiences and backgrounds, and she wants to understand those better. Through working together, she feels she can gain this kind of cultural understanding. Similarly, since being Latina was not a requirement for membership, non-Latina women who were interested in learning more about Latino culture were welcome, too. Group members often expressed admiration for the single non-Latina founder's attempts, especially regarding learning Spanish:

> "With Serafina, I think she understands, and she tries--like, if she doesn't know something, she'll ask. I just think it's so good, you know, that her not being Spanish, or Hispanic, you know?"--Guadalupe [interview, 4/7/99]

Serafina was in fact pursuing an academic minor in Spanish; as a result, her reading/writing literacy was actually higher than that of most of the Latina members. Print literacy of Spanish was not a part of the interactions of the group, however. Attention to Spanish proficiency, in turn, raises another issue: not all Latinas speak Spanish. Some of the women were embarrassed about it initially, but through the supportive environment of sisterhood, they were able to make efforts to learn more Spanish as well. As Guadalupe commented:

> "Even Isabel, she's Hispanic--I mean Puerto Rican, but she's mixed, and she doesn't speak--I mean she says she understands but she doesn't speak that much Spanish." [interview, 4/7/99]

Isabel's father was Trinidadian, and her mother was an island-born Puerto Rican. Isabel herself was born and raised in an urban area in the (mainland) US, spoke English at home, and confided in me that she was a little embarrassed about the "*jíbaro*" (roughly translated, "country" with a connotation similar to that of "hillbilly") Puerto Rican Spanish spoken by her maternal grandmother (who lived with them). Occasionally Isabel would catch words or phrases from the other Puerto Rican members' spoken Spanish, but I never heard her respond in Spanish; to the contrary, she consistently used English in speaking.

All of the focal participants (Adriana, Marta, Guadalupe, and Constancia) reported using Spanish at home, and most of the members of the sorority used Spanish or code-switched on

social occasions. During sorority business meetings, the rule was to use English in order to include as many people as possible (according to Adriana, interview 4/29/99), and perhaps understanding the reason why, members did not verbally express resistance to this policy.

Language and ethnicity were key strands in the affiliation category. Women who had either lost their Spanish and wanted to recover it or had never really learned it, sought affiliation with other Latinas as a means to regaining or learning for the first time a sense of cultural identity as Latinas. Singing along with oldies from El Gran Combo or dancing to *merengue* from Santo Domingo, talking about the transformation of Jennifer López, admiring Dolores Huerta or Gloria Estefan--all were things this group of women could participate in together to forge a sense of strength and pride in being Latina.

However, clearly there are tacit boundaries in the use of Spanish language and the publicly acceptable expression of Latino culture. In Exposing Prejudice (1996), Bonnie Urciuoli discusses the way in which racializing and ethnicizing discourses operate to racialize language difference in the public sphere. In the US, where English is considered to be essential in promoting a national identity and in securing national unity, non-English language use in the public sphere is perceived as a threat to the nation-state, and accordingly, the speakers of languages other than English are racialized--considered dangerous, dirty, unpatriotic, disloyal to the US nation-state. Ethnic discourses, in contrast, reference the mythical ideal immigrants who achieved class mobility while holding on to "safe" cultural differences such as folk songs and other traditional items such as food. In this way, admiring Latino/a pop stars and listening to Latin music is not a threat to the nation-state, but speaking Spanish in a public setting for political, educational, or work-related purposes would be racialized and perceived as threatening. Examples abound in the broader public in the forms of the immense popularity of: Taco Bell products (with their Spanish language names intact); and Ricky Martin, Jennifer López, Marc Antony, and Carlos Santana (all of whom topped the popular music charts during the period of the study with songs with Spanish language lyrics).

This perspective helps explain the apparent contradiction of joining a group to participate in Spanish-related culture but not using Spanish language varieties in official meetings, for example.

Finally, speakers of Puerto Rican Spanish are more likely to have an awareness of the consequences of using particular varieties in different contexts from their encounters with the prejudice (on the US mainland) against the Puerto Rican Spanish varieties. Speakers of Castilian Spanish tend to regard the Puerto Rican variety/ies as sub/non-standard or "incorrect", and students who use this variety in school (for example, in Spanish class or a bilingual class) are "corrected" by teachers, often with disparaging comments attached. Isabel indicated this, and Cristina (another founding member of mixed Puerto Rican and other ancestry) had encountered such attitudes in her secondary school Spanish teachers (personal communication, 12/98).

2. Recognition

In addition to attaching diverse meanings to the term "sisterhood", members had diverse reasons for deciding to join a sorority at all. One strong pattern that emerged was the drive to attain recognition, or visibility. Terms such as "getting the letters" or "wearing our letters" refer to the Greek letters that represent the organization. Wearing or displaying them is a privilege that members must earn through successful completion of the pledge process, and the letters identify the wearer as a member of both a particular Greek-letter organization, but also of the larger Greek system. There tends to be discussion in the "Greek community" regarding what constitutes "earning" the letters (that is, how tough or brutal the process must be, or how one must conduct oneself during the process). Bourdieu's (1986/1997) discussion of members' responsibilities as custodians of the limits of the group is relevant here as "the definition of the criteria of entry is at stake in each new entry" (p. 52). Thus, prestige depends on continued vigilance against the "lowering" of standards that could jeopardize the status of the organization or the system.

The three main sub-categories within recognition represent social circles within which the sorority members sought recognition through sisterhood: their public image at the University level, how they were perceived by other members of the campus Latino community, and how they were viewed by communities beyond Gateway (both spatially and temporally).

• **Public image / Equal rights**

> "We were trying to get in Panhellenic [Council], and we want, you know--I would say [we are more aligned] with the Whites [nationally affiliated historically White sororities] because we want the same rights that they have. I mean, we want to be able to vote and stuff like that, and if we're going to participate in one thing, we should be allowed to participate in everything."--Guadalupe [interview, 4/7/99]

Some of the rights to which Guadalupe refers are those conferred by the University on organizations that have been officially recognized by one of its recognizing bodies. The Panhellenic Council is one of three official recognizing bodies for Greek-letter organizations, but because of their restrictions, some organizations (notably non-Black minority organizations such as the Latino/a, Asian, and Gay/Lesbian/Transgender Greek-letter organizations) have had to go to the student government body (USG) in order to be recognized as simply another student group (rather than as a sorority or fraternity). This latter route is considered to be less prestigious by members of the Greek system.

Adriana shared Guadalupe's concern about the relationship with Panhellenic Council:

> "We were having kind of a hard time trying to go through them because I think it's the first year...we have to go to their events, their meetings and all sorts of other things, but yet we're not allowed to vote, we're not allowed to run for offices or anything in their boards, so we're not considered to be full members of Panhell. I think we were considered to be associate members of Panhell. And we were having kind of a tough time with that because we didn't see how it was fair that we have to do everything they tell us to do, but yet we weren't allowed to vote or anything." [interview 4/29/99]

As a Puerto Rican, Adriana is all too familiar with institutional constraints that come unaccompanied by the right to representation (i.e., for example: Puerto Ricans living in Puerto Rico do not have congressional representation but are bound by U.S. laws.). In this case, the University and the Panhellenic Council were posing requirements without offering access to full membership status. Many of the women in the group had lived through this kind of discrimination either from having had undocumented status when they initially arrived in the US, or through

Puerto Rican US citizenship. For those who had not experienced it, it was perhaps even more of a shock; nevertheless, all of the women may have believed that "it would be different" in higher education. This setback diminished no one's resolve, however.

In addition to gaining official recognition, Guadalupe was also concerned that the group's reputation be protected by members:

> "What I see from other--like even Latino sororities or fraternities--I go to a party and they're wearing their letters and they're like on the floor [i.e., falling down drunk] and they're wearing their letters, that gives them a bad reputation. I mean, if I didn't know them, I'd be like, 'What kind of fraternity (or sorority) is that?!'" [interview, 4/7/99]

Members often reiterated that "we want people to know us" and told how much they looked forward to "wearing the letters," indicating that they were eager to be recognized publicly. They were prepared to take the accompanying responsibility seriously.

• Image within the campus Latino community

The Latino community at Gateway is relatively small (about 1000 undergraduate Latino students on a campus of about 33,000 undergraduates), so members were very concerned about maintaining a respectable image in the community. This proved to be something they had to struggle for constantly. Amid swirling gossip (on-line--via electronic mail and listservs, and "on the street"), women faced rumors and innuendo from a variety of sources (see also discussion in the sub-category of resistance, below). In the face of this, sisterhood was one way to gain positive attention. As Guadalupe explained (referring to the Rhos' official brother fraternity, Sigma Lambda Rho):

> "We want to get their [the Sigmas'] respect because I think we'll probably do much more than the others are doing and if it's because we're not getting hit or whatever, that doesn't make us Greek? Then I think they're totally wrong. Because I think that if all that, we should be respected because we're doing community service--doing things that maybe they don't even do." [interview, 4/7/99]

When Guadalupe refers to "getting hit," she's talking about some of the more violent forms of hazing rumored to still be prevalent in the Greek system (in spite of being prohibited). Rumors were circulating that some people in the Greek system were concerned that the Rhos were "skating through," that is that their pledge process was not difficult (or brutal) enough. The women in Mu Lambda Rho faced a dilemma of how to earn the respect from the other members of the Latino Greek community, maintain their dignity within the non-Greek Latino community, and do what they thought made sense.

This situation became frustrating for members because the Sigma Lambda Rho fraternity was supposed to be supporting and encouraging them. If not, as Guadalupe explains:

> "But if we don't get the respect from them, I mean the way I see it is, if they don't give us the respect and they're talking about us, what are other people going to think? 'They're supposed to be your sisters!'" [interview, 4/7/99]

Who else would respect them? So the Sigmas' opinion was to be crucial in promoting a positive image of the Rhos in the Latino community.

- **Recognition in imagined communities**

Sisterhood also promised a means to recognition in the campus Greek system, in the University power/prestige system, in the national Panhellenic Council, in the nation-wide network of Greek organizations, connecting one to past US presidents and famous successful people. One prospective member stated that she was interested in joining because she anticipated feeling "*orgullo de ser parte de la organización*"[pride in being a part of the organization; informational meeting, 9/23]. And as Guadalupe noted, "It's not all about the letters, but we can't go without it, you know? That's just like an organization then. And organizations have T-shirts, or whatever."[interview, 4/7/99] This was a key question that I had asked myself repeatedly--Why not just settle for being recognized as a student organization? Guadalupe's point made sense if prestige was part of the equation.

Constancia's reasons for getting involved in Greek-letter organizations sprang from a realization of the power conferred through recognition. Referring to her earlier experience:

> "I saw that the White Greek system, they had a lot of benefits, they have opportunities to become involved in campus-wide activities, and they have the opportunity to go for awards, and they have the opportunity to meet the important people on campus...and I saw that these people, because of their campus-wide activities that they were involved in, they got to go to conferences with the administrators and the provost and the dean and all that." (p. 12)

She realized that membership in this system provided access to the powerful figures at the university. Then, when she subsequently happened to attend a conference at which she noticed "Latinas with letters...and then I wondered...and then I decided to start it" (p. 13)--she decided to found a chapter of Mu Lambda Rho at her university. It was only later that she discovered she had still not discovered a magic key:

> "With time, I realized that, yeah, we were still a cultural group, still a small group, not a 'real' Greek organization, so we didn't enjoy those benefits that I thought were important...Now with all the barriers that they put for our organizations to be considered and respected as a Greek organization, I do believe it's a way of oppression. It's a way of keeping the power for certain people, and the rest not. And 'We'll let them have their group, but they're not at our level yet.'"(p. 13)[Constancia, interview, 1/16/99]

By referring to "oppression", Constancia is referencing her own understanding of the power asymmetry within the university community, specifically within the Greek system on campus. Recognizing that there is a glass ceiling for the kind of group in which she was a member was frustrating for her. She seems to have believed that by mentoring a group at this university, having already ascended in the hierarchy through college credentials (she was a graduate student, thus theoretically higher in the status ladder), she would be able to lead this group to break through the glass ceiling.

Status was a key strand in the category of recognition, although ethnicity also played an important role. "Earning the letters" implies the judgment about one's efforts or achievements--does one deserve the status that the letters putatively confer? Similarly, maintaining one's own

cultural values while attempting to fit into a structure that seems to demand conflicting values proved to be a challenge. Together, the women in this group negotiated this course towards public recognition. Below, I discuss how standing together as sisters helped them to do this.

3. Solidarity

Using sisterhood as a means of getting a group of women together to achieve something else was a category that overlapped to some extent with the category of affiliation. For example, as the participants attempted to explain their understandings of Latino culture, often they gave examples of things they did which they associated with their culture, such as activities with youth groups, community service, or political activities. In the sorority context, the participants talked about sisterhood for solidarity with respect to defining themselves, establishing "resist-stances" (oppositional stances) , and performing a service to the community.

- **Self-definition / self-determination**

A doctoral candidate gave a talk on campus about his research on nationally affiliated historically White sororities. Four of the members of Mu Lambda Rho, including Serafina and Guadalupe, attended the talk, which focused on "what it's like to be in a sorority." Many of the speaker's points and audience comments related to issues about alcohol, big [fraternity] house parties, and the sorority selection process. After the talk, Serafina and Guadalupe came up to me and commented that the things he was talking about [i.e., alcohol, frat parties, rush] "don't apply to us" (fieldnotes, 2/10/99).

Because the Greek system shrouds itself in secrecy and mystery, it is difficult for prospective members to get an accurate view of what sorority life will be like if they join. The frenzied rush [selection] process during the first month of the fall semester is rigidly programmed to take interested women to each and every sorority (21 in all) in the first round (narrowing over three weeks, leading to "Pref Day" and ultimately "Bid Day"). It is not surprising then that women get more information from the mass media (e.g., movies such as *Animal House*, *Revenge of the Nerds*, and so on) than they do from living on a campus where roughly 11 percent of all women are members of sororities. Nor would the Latina women have recognized themselves in these

mass media representations of Greek life (in which Greek life participants tend to be stereotypical members of historically White Greek-letter organizations).

As founders, this group of women had to invent the culture of the group they were forming. Part of that invention included making decisions about the kind of things they would do, following some guidelines provided by Constancia, in order to earn their letters. In the face of a lot of talk about what goes on in other sororities, members were emphatic that they wanted this group to be different.

"And another thing--about the pledging. Let's not do anything really stupid. And nothing mean. I don't like mean things, you know?" Myrna said at one meeting. At the discussion following the talk on sororities, Constancia made it clear where she stood on pledging: "Everything you do in the pledging process should have a purpose behind it--I look at them [some other sororities' practices] and ask, 'What is the purpose?'" [2/15/99]. Other members also established what they would and would not put up with:

> "When I came to the informational meeting [the discussion on 2/15/99] and everyone was talking about how we were not going to be like the white sororities--if we start doing that kind of thing, I'm outta here like that!", Clara stated emphatically, gesturing with thumb over her shoulder. [meeting 3/1/99]

Adriana had actually been on the verge of joining another sorority which a number of her friends had decided to join. I asked her why she didn't:

> "I was supposed to start [the pledging process]...but when I started finding out that, like, you couldn't speak to anybody, and if you had a boyfriend you had to dump him for the semester you were pledging because you were only allowed to see him for like 45 minutes a week. And I...did not see the point in them controlling my every move. Because the point is that you're supposed to figure out time to do things by yourself. That's the whole point: You're supposed to learn how to manage your time better, so if somebody's there telling you when to do things, you're not learning anything. So I didn't like that at all."--Adriana [interview, 4/29/99]

Adriana views the experience of sisterhood as a kind of internship in balancing demands of friendship and work. She plans to use the sisterhood experience as a means of learning how to do this on her own--without someone telling her how she should be spending her time and energy.

- **Resist-stance**

When Sofia, who was an active member from another campus, attempted to direct the course of the pledging, members became extremely adamant in their defense of their right to determine their own pledging procedures [fieldnotes 3/1/99]. The "brother" fraternity, Sigma Lambda Rho (known as the Sigmas) attempted to influence the pledge process, too. Pressure from these two sources (in addition to the swirling gossip on-line and in the dorms), which continued throughout the pledge process, served to inspire explicit statements from the women as to what they would and would not do. They adopted oppositional stances to having others determine how they would conduct their business and structure their organization.

The national board of Mu Lambda Rho had changed the policy on the number of members required in order to be eligible for chapter status. Discussion among study participants mostly centered on the unfairness given the context of this institution:

> "This is the first time I hear of a sorority not being able to get their letters when we have eleven people! I mean, I understand their concern, but I think 20 is just too much! I mean, don't they think like other campuses would want their organization, and it might take two years or more to get 20 people, not even then, when there's not that many minorities on campus."--Guadalupe [interview, 4/7/99]

Guadalupe was right--at the time of the study, there were only 1,011 students (out of 33,119--3%) classified as Hispanic/Latino at Gateway; of those, fewer than half are women, many are seniors (who generally would not pledge a new sorority because of the delay in getting the letters) and first-year students (whom Mu Lambda Rho's policy prevents them from tapping). The national board was adding pressure to an already difficult situation, and members adopted oppositional stances towards it.

- **Service to the community**

For many members, there was little distinction between being Latina and doing community service: it is part of what it means to be a Latina, according to this group of women. Individuals expressed feelings of responsibility for doing something concrete to improve the lives of others while showing others what Latinas can do. As Clara explains:

> "Being in a sorority is not about X, Y, Z--it's about community service. I'm not joining another sorority because I'm Hispanic--I want to work to upgrade the image of Hispanics." [application interview 2/22/99]

Similarly, Adriana shows that the action of doing community service together serves another dual purpose:

> "We're doing something for the community, but we're also doing something for ourselves because as we work together, I think we're gonna create a bond there also, ...so we're gonna help our organization grow." [interview 1/15/99]

Her preferred form of service would be to mentor new freshmen; as she says,

> "I don't want them to feel alone their first year, because when you're here, you don't know anybody, that's like the worst feeling in the world." [interview 1/15/99].

Elevating the image of Latinos, strengthening the bonds of friendship between members, and helping others in the community were all purposes to which sisterhood could be applied effectively. According to participants' statements, it's possible to accomplish more with a group of committed sisters than as a lone do-gooder, and a group of Latinas doing good reflects favorably on the whole Latino community.

Gender and ethnicity were key strands in the solidarity category as group-identified Latino-based cultural ideas about women doing community service work served to reinforce the purposes embedded within the sorority's framework. Gender and ethnicity were also important strands in women's resisting culturally sanctioned patriarchal definitions--both from the Greek system and from the Latino fraternity brothers in Sigma Lambda Rho--of what a Latina Greek should be like. This issue resurfaces in the fourth category in which we consider how women chose membership in Mu Lambda Rho.

4. Selection

Deciding to join a sorority in order to diminish feelings of marginality or anonymity, in order to have the experience of close friendships in college, and even for cultural purposes all seem to make sense, but at the time of this sorority's founding, there were already two other Latina sororities in addition to a large number of Black (four) and White (21) sororities (and 450 non-Greek student organizations) on campus. Besides the obvious possibility that individuals in this group might have been subjected to discrimination in the sorority "rush" process (the process during the first month of fall semester involving a series of social events through which individuals identify sororities that "fit" and sororities identify prospective members who "fit" the sorority), individuals gave a variety of reasons for deciding to seek membership in this sorority rather than another. These lend insight, albeit indirectly, as to what the individuals sought from sisterhood in Mu Lambda Rho.

• **Fear of hazing**

"Are we going to get pledged hard?" Serafina asked (meeting, 11/23/98). She said she'd heard rumors. Others murmured assent, adding comments such as, "I don't want that; I've been through enough already" and "we shouldn't do more of that--we get enough of that in society." Indeed, a number of the women in this group who had come here with undocumented status had either gone through horrific experiences crossing the border themselves or had been told of such experiences by family members. Constancia attempted to assuage their fears by telling them time and again, "We're not about embarrassment, we're about empowerment. Remember, our motto is 'Culture is Pride, Pride is Success.'" Nevertheless, this fear informed the women's selection process.

In an interview, Guadalupe described to me some hazing experienced by a co-worker in a restaurant where she had worked. It wasn't brutal, but it was time-consuming and petty. Guadalupe explained about her thoughts regarding pledging a sorority after seeing what her co-worker had gone through:

"Even if I were gonna do it, I wouldn't do it just because of that, you know, I think that's just too much. She was failing all her classes that semester, and I think with the other sororities it's the same thing, 'cause they really pledge you really hard, and you basically don't have time to study. And I think that's not the point of it." [interview 1/10/99]

Guadalupe is a hardworking, serious student who takes pride in her academic achievements and is looking forward to becoming an immigration lawyer and working for social justice. Sacrificing those dreams for the intangible benefits of sisterhood didn't seem worth it.

Marta had also thought about the sacrifice involved in pledging other sororities:

"I don't think I would put myself through all kinds of pain and something that's not going to make any kind of benefit, you know?...I wouldn't put myself through that just to belong to a group...I know I sacrifice things, like sometimes for community service I have walked back and forth. Well, that's a sacrifice, but it's nothing I regretted. I like to do community service. It's not that I'm going to do something that I'm going to regret for the rest of my life." [interview, 4/16/99].

She later tells me of an experience one of her tutees had had:

"The process is hard. 'Cause my student got beat up. She was in the trunk of a car for three hours driving. I was like, 'What did you got [sic] out of that?' She was like, 'Well, it was part of the process.' I was like, 'So they could kill you and it was just part of the process??'" [interview, 4/16/99]

Both Guadalupe and Marta question whether drawing on sisterhood to survive this kind of treatment (in order to gain...sisterhood) would be worth the risk and sacrifice involved. In this case, fear of hazing served as a negative incentive (or an incentive not to seek membership in another sorority) as well as a self-definition point: to make sure that pledging did not involve this kind of activity.

- **Disapproval of behaviors**

"I don't know, I guess it's a stereotype, but the majority of them [other sororities], you know, maybe will do one community service, but not on a regular basis. They just think

more of parties, drinking, and at least I see that this group [Mu Lambda Rho] is not into that...We want to give the respect to [Mu Lambda Rho], you know. If we're going to drink whenever we get our letters or we have a pin [pledge pin, insignia worn during pledging], we're not going to wear that."--Guadalupe [interview, 4/7/99]

Guadalupe and others were concerned about joining an organization they could feel proud of. They wanted to show respect for their letters by behaving respectably while wearing sorority insignia. They realized that once they were associated with a sorority, their individual reputations would be at stake whenever someone wearing their sorority's insignia went out in public. Sisters had to support each other in upholding the reputation of the group, and likewise, they could not let the others down by behaving inappropriately while wearing group identifying symbols.

In an interview (4/29/99), Adriana and I discussed her process of considering joining a sorority. She said,

"I went to the interest meeting, and I didn't like--I didn't feel comfortable, even though I was friends with them, I didn't feel...well, [describing one of the women there who had been a friend] I don't want to be mean, but--she looks 'ghetto'."

"What does that mean?" I asked.

"Ghetto? I don't know...she looks to me--not to say that you're supposed to look a certain way--she doesn't look feminine... Or her sisters. They don't--to me they look more like a gang than a sorority, and her ideas--she's, like, hard core; she's, like, tough. I'm not like that at all. I'm the total opposite of that. I'm very feminine...And I knew what type of sorority that was when she started telling me how they would march and like, have uniforms and camouflage, and like..."

"Camouflage???" I interjected.

"M-hm. I was like, 'That is not for me.'...I was like, 'I don't see what I'm gonna get out of marching down the street! Is that providing some sort of benefit for me? No! Is it providing some sort of benefit for anybody else? No! So I didn't see the point in those things; that's why I didn't want to join. I didn't see the point in it at all." (pp. 1-2)

So Adriana had some boundaries in mind that she was not willing to cross in order to gain the putative benefits of sisterhood.

- **Lack of comfort / perceived discrimination**

"...They didn't feel comfortable with the other groups and felt that the other groups were very closed to certain types of people...you can see, your group is different, I think, and I'm very proud of that. Not only are they from different backgrounds, but they're not--not that the others are not good--but I see them as above the others. You have RAs and you have two who are mothers, and you have like [Marta and Guadalupe] are involved in so many good, really good activities...They're not there just to wear the letters and march and be mean to other people, you know? That's what I see in all the other groups. So that's why I understand when they say they didn't feel comfortable and they were looking for something else."--Constancia [interview, 1/16/99].

Constancia's point is crucial--often the women perceived discrimination wherever they looked or just didn't feel comfortable in other groups. There were Latina sororities that just didn't fit the way this group came to fit the women who selected Mu Lambda Rho. Most of the women were fourth-year students planning to graduate the following year, and nearly all had thought about joining a sorority at one time or another.

Marta had been thinking about joining a sorority since her sophomore year. A friend, who was also interested, did some scouting work for her. Marta describes the information she got from the friend:

"She was like, 'No, I didn't like it.' And I was like, 'Why not?' And she was like, 'Well, first of all they kind of'--because she was Dominican--'first, I don't think they're looking for Dominicans.' I was like, 'How do you know?' And she was like, 'Because they're all Puerto Ricans, and they--when I said I was Dominican, they gave me a bad look.'" [interview 4/16/99]

Reports such as this were the most common source of information for group members. Many had relied on the experiences of others in forming their opinions of what various sororities were like. Still others drew more heavily on mass media representations and stereotypes:

> "My first impressions of sororities came from *Revenge of the Nerds*, but, well, when I saw them, wearing those pretty dresses, I just thought, 'Oh, they'll take one look at me and...'--well, I knew they wouldn't accept me. A friend asked me to go to a [Mu Lambda Rho] meeting, and it felt more like something I could do."--Sofia [discussion 2/15/99]

Later in the same discussion, Sofia also talked about weightist discrimination in White sorority rush as reported in Glamour magazine; the topic dominated the remainder of the evening's discussion. However, feelings of perceived discrimination or even just a lack of comfort around the women one is thinking of calling sisters deterred women from pursuing membership in those groups. This theme recurred over and over. For example, Sylvia tells:

> "I would get cards for rush because my name doesn't have the tilda and my first name, [Sylvia], they probably thought I was White because of my name, but if I went, I'd look way too Latina for them."--Sylvia [discussion 2/15/99]

Guadalupe also relates similar problems with other Latina sororities she had investigated, and tells that a key reason for not choosing to join them was the way they would have treated her:

> "It didn't interest me because just the way they look at you--they don't even, like, say hi to you. They are all stuck up. I don't know, they just think about their group, and that's all they think about. They don't think about, you know, socializing in any other environment, and I think to me, if I'm going to be in a group, I don't want them to tell me, 'You can't socialize with this person' just because that person's not in the group." [interview, 1/10/99].

As an officer and a very active member in three other organizations (LULAC, MEChA, and a student action committee she had founded with other students to recruit high school students from Migrant Education), Guadalupe couldn't imagine what her college life would mean without those pieces. Sacrificing those and relationships with friends outside the sorority would not be worth it.

Ethnicity, gender, and status were all key strands in this category. Indirect (and possibly inaccurate) sources of information notwithstanding, members drew on a variety of aspects of their identities in making the decision to join a sorority, and in particular, to found a new chapter of this sorority. Prospective members established concepts of what kind of environment would be hospitable for sisterhood relationships and what kind of things they would hope to gain through those sisterhood relationships. They used fear of hazing, disapproval of behaviors of others, and rejection of discriminatory environments to construct a context that would be more conducive to achieving affiliation, solidarity, and recognition.

Discussion

In seeking to become more visible, the women of Mu Lambda Rho were certainly pushing for recognition. This was particularly true because they did so under the auspices of a Latina cultural organization. In this way, their actions served to call attention to particular ways of being a Latina: Latina as academically successful college student (all members had to maintain a GPA above 2.5, above the University average), Latina as purveyor of cultural information (the sorority frequently presented cultural programs), Latina as possessor of cultural capital (i.e., the prestige of Greek organization membership, recognition as full participants in the mainstream campus community).

The aspect of cultural capital, however, is where redistribution comes into play. In fact, I argue that by accommodating the dominant cultural structure of the Greek-letter organizations (including requesting associate membership in the Panhellenic Council, choosing to participate in events with White fraternities--albeit on their own terms, belonging to a nationally affiliated Greek-letter organization), these women gave up some autonomy and self-determination in order to gain some kind of cultural capital. What is cultural capital in this context? In the University context, cultural capital takes the form of social capital (Bourdieu, 1986/1997)--of recognition that may lead to connections that may enhance career opportunities. Such recognition can be captured through participation in the widely-publicized events in which the Greek community participates such as the annual dance marathon held to raise funds for a children's cancer support program, the

homecoming parade, the Greek Sing, Spring Week, Greek awards ceremonies, and leadership positions within the Panhellenic council. Contrast this with the visibility of an ordinary student organization, and it is easy to see the attraction of Greek-letter organizations in terms of cultural capital capture potential.

Another consideration is that the women in this group sought connection with other members of the Latino community--on campus and in the larger imagined Latino community--through learning about other versions of Latino culture and defining their own version. For example, one sorority member, Michele, said in her sorority application interview, "I'm Hispanic but was raised in an area where there weren't many Hispanics, so I wanted to be around more Hispanics and share...culture" [1/25/99]. Raised in a suburb of Miami, Michele exemplifies the situation of about half of the group (who were raised outside of predominantly Hispanic communities) in that she didn't have a clear idea of what kinds of things made her family's culture representative of "Hispanic" culture. In other conversations and a subsequent interview, Michele actually indicated that, unlike other members of the group, she had quite negative associations with Hispanic culture from which she generally tried to disassociate herself.

The island-born Puerto Rican members, on the other hand, had been raised in Puerto Rican communities on the Island or on the mainland. Sometimes this was confusing, especially when it came to understanding what made somebody "Spanish". Another member, Adriana, was confused when her family first moved to the Bronx (New York) from the Island (when she was in the fifth grade) because although she had learned English in Puerto Rico, she couldn't get used to being immersed in it. She said,

> There were a lot of kids that spoke--they didn't speak Spanish, but they were Spanish, and that was a lot different because I knew how to speak English, but I didn't want to speak English because I didn't want to lose myself--I didn't want to assimilate with them. I didn't want that, so I actually stopped speaking for a whole year. [interview, 1/29/99]

Earlier in the interview, Adriana had described her life in Puerto Rico as almost typically middle class--filled with Barbies, birthday parties, and sleepovers--coming to a sudden end when they moved to the Bronx, where she was the only child she knew who brought a packed lunch to school, who "was not thinking about going out with boys or hanging out on the street by [herself]," who instead had to go straight home after school with her brother. Class shock might have been a stronger factor in her not speaking in fifth grade.

Whereas Adriana's mother tried to protect her children from the dangers of the city, Clara's mother schooled her in a different aspect of public sphere behavior: language choice. Clara, another member of the sorority who self-identifies as Hispanic, explained that, "My mom--I asked her--she said when we were young, she would speak to me and my sister in Spanish at home, but when we were in public, she would speak to us in English" [interview 10/5/99]. Clara told me that this was just so that they "would learn how to speak both languages," but whatever the case, Clara came to college and sought out a group of Latina women partly so that she could practice her Spanish [informal interview, 12/99].

For all of the women in this group, suppressing traditional and ethnic culture may have taken a toll, becoming more significant especially as they consider life after college. Being autonomous and adult means making choices about what kind of person you want to be, how you want others to perceive you. These women were presented with an opportunity to forge bonds with other Latinas and support each other in (re)discovering and/or constructing what it means to be a Latina at the turn of the 21st century. Thus, the sorority became an ethnic strategy.

This latter strategy has been noted by Olivas (1996) in her analysis of the functions of the sorority in the lives of the Latina college sorority members she studied. She found that in addition to enhancing student retention (in the face of a statistic of 80% of Latino students leaving college before obtaining a degree), the Latina sorority also aided in "preserving or regaining an individual, yet collective ethnic identity" (1996, unpaged). At the university in this current study, the graduation rate for minority students (61%) far exceeds the national average for minority students (41%), while still falling short of a graduation rate of 80% of non-minority students (for these

data, "minority" students are defined as Hispanic and African American). In light of these figures, membership in a supportive group that might improve the rates of retention and graduation of Latina students can be hailed as one effective strategy.

Conclusions

A central question recurring throughout this study was: Why were they doing this? Was the aim "Power through sisterhood," along the lines of feminist theory (i.e., solidarity for redistribution)? Or was it rather "Power through community," along the lines of civil rights movements (i.e., recognition towards redistribution)? Did sisterhood merely serve as a support during risk-taking in the quest for recognition, as in the consciousness raising groups of the second wave of the women's movement? Or was sorority/sisterhood a means to an end where the end was the attainment of social status and cultural capital, via recognition? My conclusion is that it was a combination of these at different moments in the evolution of the group, depending on the goals at hand.

First of all, sisterhood in this Latina sorority did not conform to the meanings in the literature on White or Black sororities but did contain some elements common to each. At the very least, we can see this as an instance of strategic action in the spirit envisioned by Swidler (1986). She writes that "publicly available meanings facilitate certain patterns of action, making them readily available, while discouraging others...it is the reappropriation of larger, culturally organized capacities for action that gives culture its enduring effects" (p. 283). In this case, it is irrelevant that the "cultural background" of the appropriators is incongruent with that of those who originated the institution (of Greek-letter organizations): the appropriators can still realize the benefits.

Secondly, sisterhood in this Latina sorority does serve a political purpose, although it is not clear that participants themselves perceive this meaning. In addition, some of the patterns of interaction in this early stage of the group's existence match those attributed to Latina political participation structures as described by Carol Hardy-Fanta (1993), perhaps suggesting that

involvement in this organization serves as a precursor to political involvement (in any sense--ranging from contributing to community uplift by mobilizing people to take action to holding public office themselves). In spite of the formal structures inherent in the Greek-letter organization form, at this early stage in the formation of the group, I see connectedness, collectivity, community, and consciousness in the articulated aims of Mu Lambda Rho, as well as the actions and words of this colony's founding members in their efforts to achieve solidarity, to operate in a non-hierarchical manner, to be together socially (affiliation), and to achieve recognition in the community through their actions and through clarifying how they would like to be seen.

Participants (members of Mu Lambda Rho) were engaged in ongoing negotiation of the meaning and goals of their participation in this group. Construction/imagining of a group cultural identity (predicated on the existence of a larger Latino cultural identity) occurred as a result of push and pull in centripetal fashion as described by Lave and Wenger (1991): The center was continually shifting, adjusting to accommodate or repel views, actions, and attitudes of newcomers and "old-timers" alike as group members adjusted to each others' perceptions and those of external forces (mass media, friends, the larger Greek system, and so on). The end result was not an end: as a community, it was (and is) constantly evolving. As the group grew in numbers and began to gain the much sought-after visibility, I looked to see what effect they would have on the larger campus community's understandings of Latina cultural identity (as well as their own understandings of the same). Findings of that subsequent phase of the study are to be reported in a later paper.

Implications

This study may have implications for pedagogy and educational policy regarding language, language education, and education in general. By founding or joining a sorority, the individuals in this study demonstrated that they did believe the path to success was through what appeared to be adoption of dominant cultural values. As a public performance, it would seem to fit the assimilation model. However, within this community, participants began to develop and attach

unique meanings to the structures, appropriating them; that is, structures were not necessarily taken up in the same way as they would be in the White (in this case, the dominant culture) sororities, so it was not merely assimilation or accommodation--rather it was strategic appropriation.

For example, at this campus, the nationally affiliated historically White sororities had larger memberships and were thus prone to a greater degree of internal ranking: leadership positions were relatively few given the number of members (77 members : 14 positions, average). The group in this study, Mu Lambda Rho sorority, had a lower ratio of members to leadership positions (at this point in the study, aiming at a maximum of 20 members : 14 positions), so it was more prone to an interactive form of political participation, as described by Hardy-Fanta (1993). The extent to which this and other structural aspects of the sorority continued to be appropriated in a culturally different or unique way as the group evolved is beyond the scope of this paper but was further explored in the subsequent phase of the study.

The patterns of participation and attitudes that emerged in this study hold implications for teachers, particularly in changing the way teachers perceive their Latina students' participation in sanctioned curricular activities, and even for the expansion of curricular spaces to include alternative possible frames for participation and demonstration of knowledge. Furthermore, we can learn from this form of participation about ways to transform mainstream curricular contexts into ones that are less hierarchical, more interactive, and more democratic. As Marta said about the sorority:

> "The challenge overall is to keep everybody together--for everybody to feel the same responsibility as everybody else, 'I'm part of it, I'm responsible for it.' I think that's a challenge." [interview, 1/06/99]

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Appendix A

Extract from a Mu Lambda Rho informational brochure

What is [Mu Lambda Rho]?
[Mu Lambda Rho] Sorority is an academic, cultural, and social organization. However, as women, we feel that our primary goal is to promote our evolving rich and diverse culture, by sharing it with others.

Our History:
...Our members have recognized the need for togetherness and support among women of all cultures at their universities and colleges and are determined to contribute to the overall success of women in the world.

Our Principles:
- Morals and Ethics
- Community Service
- Academics
- Cultural Awareness
- Social Interaction

Morals and Ethics
As members of [Mu Lambda Rho] we display good sound moral judgments at all times. We are considerate and kind to all people, giving people the same respect we would like to be given. as a member of [Mu Lambda Rho] we always represent sisterhood, remembering individual actions reflect on the sorority as a whole.

Community Service
Our community services are intended to help others in our communities. Our services should be viewed as a way of contributing to the betterment of our community. By participating in community services, it will help us to respond to peoples' needs through listening and understanding.

Academics
The success and recognition of Latina women depends on our education. We, the future leaders of this country, have the opportunity to pursue a higher education. Some times it may be necessary to seek help from others like tutors, professors, and our sorority sisters in order to obtain our degrees. A solid education is one key to our future. It opens doors for us, lets our voices be heard, and enables our dreams to become realities.

Cultural Awareness
[Mu Lambda Rho] believes that Culture is Pride, Pride is Success. Exploring the richness in tradition of Latina culture that encompasses the heritage of Native Americans (North, Central, and South), Europeans, African and Asian and their multiple and interesting mixtures we celebrate the diversity of backgrounds of all the members of our sorority. Through these efforts in cultural awareness, we expect that each woman will explore the roots, traditions, and share those with other members so that cultural understanding and respect is promoted. We hope to examine our cultural legacy and preserve our history for our children. At the same time, we hope to create new traditions so that future generations of college women find their college years filled with pride and joy in the celebration of their identity and heritage.

Social Interaction
As members of [Mu Lambda Rho] we have the opportunity to be open to all types of positive social interactions. Engaging in social interactions helps us not only to understand others but also ourselves. Although we all have our own individual differences, we must be able to be accepting

and open-minded of actions. In all our principles we strive for respect and credibility toward our Latina heritage.

Our Purpose:
The purpose of [Mu Lambda Rho] Sorority shall be primarily one of promoting standards of excellence in morality, ethics, and education. Further, the Sorority shall work to better serve the needs and wants of all people by disseminating information about the diverse culture which we all share. Finally, the Sorority shall maintain respect for the views of others through acceptance, thereby, enhancing our understanding of one another, and thus bettering our community, our country, and the world.

Our Motto:
"Culture is Pride, Pride is Success."

[This information is also available on the sorority web page, which is accessible through the LatinoGreeks website.]